

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE August 11 , 1998

CONTACT: Diane Pratt (202) 225-5235

**"Veterans: They Were There for Us,
Will We Be There for Them?"**

By Rep. Allen Boyd

Since I took office in 1997, I have traveled throughout the district, talking to hundreds of North Florida's veterans. These men and women, who served our country with honor and distinction, are raising valid concerns on such crucial matters as: the need for quality health care and appropriate treatment for those suffering from Gulf War illness; cuts in VA case workers; the inadequate system for adjusting VA compensation for inflation; and the need to protect employment preferences for veterans.

As a freshman Member of Congress, I thought these problems could be easily rectified based solely on the merits of maintaining our commitment to those who fought in defense of American ideals. But, I soon learned the harsh realities associated with the up-hill battle of reversing the nation's 30-year, destructive trend of spending beyond its means.

However, fiscal restraints are not the only obstacle I have encountered. Today, there is a new mood among some Members that is insensitive to the needs of our veteran population. Some attribute this to the fact that never before has Congress had so few Members with military service. Whatever the reason, I was saddened that a majority of my colleagues recently supported two bills that slight our veterans--the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century and the House approved budget plan. I voted against this legislation because of provisions to reduce benefits for veterans.

The transportation bill eliminated funding for compensation benefits for veterans suffering from tobacco related illnesses. I disagree with the majority of my colleagues who say these funds should be spent on highway funding and not redirected into other veterans programs. Therefore, while opposing the bill, I worked with the House leadership to improve the final version of the transportation bill. The approved changes redirected nearly one-fifth of the cut (\$1.6 billion) back to veterans programs. However, a majority of the funds saved from cutting tobacco related compensation will still go to highway projects.

Second, I opposed the House Republican budget plan because it assumes a five-year savings from veterans of \$10.4 billion, of which \$10 billion is to be achieved by prohibiting service-connected disability compensation for tobacco-related illnesses. Now, who are we kidding here? Congress has already spent those savings on highway projects. Therefore, based on this budget, veterans must absorb yet another \$10 billion cut.

As a fiscal conservative, I realize the importance of balancing the nation's budget as the first step to reducing our nation's \$5 trillion debt. I even acknowledge the near impossibility of introducing any new programs to assist veterans under these fiscal constraints. But, veterans have already suffered substantial cuts for the sake of budget savings. It is criminal to ask them to sacrifice another \$10.4 billion in benefits. America's veterans have given up enough.

Recently, members of the House Appropriations Committee patted themselves on the back when they proposed to freeze veterans medical care at its current level of \$17 billion. This does not account for inflation, much less increased demand by a growing number of veterans in need of health care. Therefore, I supported amendments which passed and added another \$304 million for medical care and \$21 million in grants to states for nursing home construction. This still falls short of what our veterans deserve.

Clearly, we are facing severe challenges when addressing veterans issues. We must continue work to protect current programs, streamline for cost reductions, and prioritize spending to ensure funds are directed to those most in need. In addition, we must improve communications between our nation's veterans and the government officials who serve them.

Toward achieving that end, I have organized two public forums where veterans can voice their concerns about benefits and programs directly to senior officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs. The first event, recently hosted in Lake City, was of great benefit to both the 100 plus veterans who attended and to me. I would like to thank the VA officials who participated. On Monday, August 24, I am hosting a second forum in Panama City, and I hope that those of you who could not attend the first event will join me for this one. The forum will take place from 2 pm to 4 pm CST, and will be held in the Language Art Lecture Hall at Gulf Coast Community College, located at 5230 W. Hwy 98 in Panama City. If you have any questions, please contact my Panama City office at (850) 785-0812.